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## Women's Studies International Forum

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## Book Review

Mary Evans, Clare Hemmings, Marsha Henry, Hazel Johnstone, Sumi Madhok, Ania Plomien and Sadie Wearing, *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, SAGE Publications Ltd., 2014, pp. 650, (pp. i-xxvi), isbn: 978-1-4462-5241-3

This is a *tour-de-force* and difficult to summarise in the space allowed for this review; nevertheless I shall try. And I shall try with reference to the previous SAGE version of this *Handbook*, i.e. the 2007 volume, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, entitled *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*.<sup>1</sup> I found that despite the seeming pitch towards theory in the later *Handbook*, the two volumes cover much the same ground though perhaps with less emphasis on feminist methodology and updated theoretical arguments in the new volume, but with the addition of two significant and impressive sections reflecting the materiality of modern or probably it is better to say, recent times – economics and war.

My decision to review this book was based on my understanding of the value of such a volume as an excellent way of updating myself on recent developments in a specific intellectual and research field. Commissioned by authoritative editors, and written by key researchers and scholars, the expectation was that it would build on previous generations of scholars to produce the latest and most lucid understanding of the field of feminism. It did not disappoint.

Mary Evans argues in her introduction that the history of feminist theory is not linear – from absence to presence – neither is it necessarily aligned to modernity and progress. Rather, the focus of the feminism in this volume has three major forms: (i) engagement with various forms of politics of the world in which we live, (ii) fusion of academic disciplines and the possibilities of cross-disciplinary research, and (iii) the use of personal involvement and recognition. Most important is the role of feminist theory as a challenge to what has existed as knowledge, which has hitherto had the covert or overt authority of man.

The volume has five sections.<sup>2</sup> The first entitled 'Epistemology and Marginality' explores alternative feminist positions and understandings (e.g. empiricism, standpoint theory, marginality), the relationship of nature to culture, feminist autobiography, research and power, feminism's relationship to experience, feminism and psychoanalytic theory and feminism and religion. The second section entitled 'Literary, Visual and Cultural Representation' contains a variety of contributions: on Margaret Atwood's book *Oryx and Crake*; the recent TV series

(not the 1945 film) *Mildred Pierce*; life writing against racism; memory work; feminism and pornography; women in popular culture; and journalism and consumption. The third section entitled 'Sexuality' contains seven chapters in which, as its editor Clare Hemmings notes, sexuality can be seen to refer to 'sex acts, reproduction, labour discourse or regulatory concept, psychic structure and excess, normative frame, that which connects bodies' (p268). More concretely, topics include issues for gay asylum seekers; feminism, sexuality and globalised, international agencies; sexuality and materialism, transnational black feminisms; state-based governance and sexuality; trafficking, and sexuality and political economy. To this point, some contributions might seem more eccentric than others but, overall, feminist theory is being covered as might be expected. But what most caught my eye were the final two sections.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that the whole editorial team is based at the London School of Economics, the fourth section is devoted to the 'Economy' with contributions reflecting the broad concerns with the world of gender differences in the economy, and the economic aspects of everyday life. Commissioned after the onset of the global economic crisis of 2007 onwards and completed before there was any sign of recovery, much of the section refers to the crisis and the importance for feminist theorising of understanding the workings of neoliberalism. The first two chapters of the section offer a critique of the cornerstones of neo-classical economic theory including the gendered construction, say of rationality, and of macro- and micro-economic modellings, while the third offers the concept of intersectionality as a means of avoiding the false homogenisation of women's and men's lives. Later chapters focus on key substantive fields such as care, seen here as a commodity, gender income inequalities, the relationship between politics and economics (using the case of the European Union), and global economics. The final chapter of the section summarises how gender relations are played out at macro, meso and micro levels within neoliberalism as the commanding economic force of the present era, and the possibilities of public interventions.

The final section of the volume on 'War Violence and Militarisation' has a resounding and awful echo to the news of terrorism and human cruelty that we continually hear about if we are in the West, and forms part of our everyday experience if we live in or near war zones. This section explores how discourses of violence play out on the bodies of male and female subjects, and how gender is produced and reproduced in violent and martial contexts. Examination is made of the

enduring myths of rescue pervading the field starting with the Trojan War; popular conceptions of militarised masculinities and their implications; genocide and actions that are gender-selective termed 'gendercide'; and sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict settings. Feminist analysis of violence includes pointing to the unexceptionality of political violence when compared to everyday experience, a focus on females as perpetrators, and the role of the emotions in violence.

In so large and scholarly volume it has been difficult to do more than list and discuss briefly a few of the topics included and the arguments made, and the cost of the book will no doubt prove prohibitive for purchase by individuals. But please make sure that your library gets a copy, so that the knowledge laid out in this exceptional volume is valued and circulated rather than dismissed or forgotten.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Hesse-Biber, Sharlene Nagy (2007) *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*. SAGE Publications, 2007

<sup>2</sup>Author details may be found at <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-sage-handbook-of-feminist-theory/book238838#contents>.

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